

Almost Killed by a Practice Bomb



Photograph by LCdr. Greg J. Burgess



This bomb-storage crate belies how bad the damage was.



Bomb fragments and debris littered the area around the mishap site.

A blood trail led from the bomb build-up area and is a clear sign of a serious injury.



Photograph by Ltjg. Jose A. Colon

It seemed like just another day of Hornet flight ops at NAS Oceana. It was a carbon-copy schedule, which meant flying four, turn four, and turn four with CATM-9 missiles, TACTS PODS and practice bombs. Does this sound familiar? The flight schedule just had resumed after being halted for a week because of the World Trade Center terrorist attack. Everyone was on edge, and we were only an hour from our own incident. What started as a normal day soon became anything but typical.

The CO had cancelled the flight schedule after the second launch of four aircraft. This wasn't too bad because we had noticed warning signs that showed a general lack of focus on maintenance practices. This led the skipper to call a no-notice safety stand-down, which allowed all hands to step back and to assess how they were doing business.

Once flight operations were cancelled, the ordies began the routine job of disassembling all unused practice bombs. We normally used Mk-76s, but the weapons department had only BDU-33 practice bombs—because of a fleetwide shortage of Mk-76s.

We had the current checklists and safety devices, and our shop had used them since returning from deployment three months earlier. The quality assurance/safety observer (QA/SO), team leader in training (TL/IT), and two team members (TM) began disassembling 24 unused BDU-33s. The required numbers of qualified AOs were present for the job. Safety blocks were installed in the weapons, and the required personal-protective equipment (PPE) and a can of water was available.

Early in the job, one team member had to leave the bomb build-up area to recover a returning aircraft. When he departed, the TL/IT decided to speed up the job by moving disassembled bombs from a worktable to the top of a box next to a shipping crate—to be stowed and used another day. He didn't notice the QA/SO place a thirteenth bomb on top of the box. In his eagerness to accomplish the task, he assumed that last bomb was safe and carried the fully assembled BDU-33 about six feet, turned it nose down, and placed it into the crate. The thirteenth BDU proved to be an unlucky one.

The CO heard the explosion in his office more than 100 yards away, so did the people in maintenance


control, plane captains in their shop, and ordnancemen on the flight line—who heard it over the whine of the returning jet's engines. Mk-4 signal cartridges make enough noise to get everybody's attention, and it sounds a lot like an exploding artillery shell.

The ordie lived, but he was lucky—if you can call it luck. He broke his jaw in two places, requiring two metal plates and his jaw to be wired shut for several weeks. The skin and tissue on his face were blown wide open, which required a large number of stitches and caused the loss of facial-muscle control on the right side because of severed nerves. He also suffered phosphorus burns to the face and neck. His hearing was thought to be permanently affected, but now is OK, and he still can see. But it was close. Had he been an inch or so closer in any direction, this mishap could have ended in a memorial service.

The mishap report doesn't mention it, but this incident affected his family and shipmates who saw the incident. I can only imagine the thoughts that ran through his wife's mind during the six hours he was in surgery.

Can you imagine having to tell his children that he will be in the hospital for a long time and might not be able to smile at them in the same way as before? Or hearing a loud

explosion next to you and then watching a shipmate stagger around in pain, bleeding profusely from his neck? He will be reminded of the mishap every time he looks in the mirror. His shipmates will get a daily reminder, too, of the havoc caused when a maintainer lost SA for just a second.

We never may know what was on his mind to cause him to miss the percussion block installed on the bomb. We only can guess why a QA/SO didn't notice the TL/IT placing a fully assembled bomb into the shipping crate. We do know a lack of attention to detail caused a Sailor to be injured seriously. 

Chief Williams wrote this article while assigned to the VFA-105 ordnance shop. He recently transferred to Japan. Ltjg. Colon is the gunner at VFA-105.

